

*A Return to Aesthetics: Autonomy, Indifference, and Postmodernism.* By JONATHAN LOESBERG. Stanford U.P. 2005. pp. 304. £45.50 (hbk); £13.50 (pbk).

LOESBERG'S title might suggest a backwards turn. On the contrary, however, this is a forward-looking and vital contribution to aesthetics. In a convincing account, which masterfully links careful historical analysis with contemporary debate, Loesberg offers what is badly needed: a way out and beyond the ideological impasse between the alleged foundationalism of aesthetics and the supposed anti-aesthetics of postmodernism. Most remarkably, Loesberg manages to do this without renouncing his belief in the Enlightenment concepts of aesthetic value and autonomy and without giving up his endorsement of post-modern social and political critique. Above all, he reminds us that 'the value of aesthetics... is that it offers ways of apprehending and interpreting things in the world' (p. 74).

The book has four chapters. In the first two, Loesberg revisits the Kantian origins of the aesthetic concepts of autonomy, indifference, and sensuous embodiment, and demonstrates their unchanged use for evaluating art. However, Loesberg is adamant that the significance of aesthetics goes far beyond the scope of art. He wants to re-establish aesthetics' critical function for critique and resistance, which he sees as being opened up by the activity of aesthetic apprehension. In his view, these first two chapters

stand by themselves as, in effect, a return to aesthetics, a return to these classic concepts to see them as far more challenging and charges with possibilities than the usual definitions of

them make them seem. The chapters attempt to explicate them as worth employing in order to evaluate art on its own terms rather than as disguised ideology. (p. 8)

Chapter 1, 'Aesthetics and the Argument from Design', offers an extremely rich and clear reconstruction of the historical context in which the concept of autonomous form (in the Kantian version of purposiveness without a purpose) first took shape. Loesberg weaves a complex tapestry of late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century thought, which reties the crucial knot between natural theology and aesthetics. This enables him to detach the Kantian concept of purposiveness without a purpose from its Anglo-American reception (largely filtered through Coleridge, and, as Prettejohn has recently reminded us, de Staël, Ruskin, and Pater). It can thus be seen in the light of Kant's response to the argument of design and thus becomes recognizable as a necessary underpinning of postmodernist critique. The possibility of apprehending purposiveness in an object while at the same time suspending the belief in its purpose—in theological terms, to appreciate the design-like system of nature without asserting the existence of God, the Designer—grants the opportunity to criticize beliefs in justice, objectivity, and other foundations, without being pushed into the corner of subjective relativism.

In Chapter 2, 'Indifferent Embodiment', Loesberg links a detailed discussion of Duchamp's *Fountain* with reconstructions of Kant's notion of aesthetic indifference and Hegel's conception of sensuous embodiment. Again, he emphasizes the fact that these ideas were meant to capture modes of seeing, apprehending, and interpreting, and not particular qualities of (art) objects (the *Fountain* is a case in point). Loesberg traces this view through Schopenhauer and, above all, Nietzsche (who used aesthetic apprehension as all-encompassing method), and shows the hidden, but powerful role it plays in their postmodern heirs.

Chapters 3 and 4 deliver on that which the earlier parts of the book had been leading up

to. In Chapter 3, Loesberg shows precisely how the aesthetic concepts excavated earlier play out in the context of Foucault's constructions of discursive formations and his view of power. In Chapter 4, he highlights—very much against Bourdieu's own conviction—the points at which Bourdieu's critique of what he calls the 'habitus' of aesthetics and the class distinctions created by art and academic discourse is inextricably bound up with the enabling and liberating force of the aesthetic attitude whose reactionary manifestations Bourdieu is right to oppose.

Loesberg's argument is, in short, that the many misinterpretations of the concepts of aesthetic value, formalism, and symbolic embodiment have covered up their explanatory and political potential. Aesthetic apprehensions, construed as modes of 'seeing objects in terms of the patterns one sees in their surface appearances and the significances with which one can endow those patterns' (p. 9), provide an alternative to the discourses of truth and objectivity, which, as Loesberg argues, enables the very postmodern oppositions that have been criticising aesthetics as reactionary ideology. Understanding them *aesthetically*, explains how they do not intend to settle the reality of their views and still do not collapse into subjective relativism. Instead they ask 'for a Kantian intersubjective assent: it makes sense, they say, to see the world this way and they offer that making sense to readers for their assent to that sense' (p. 10).

This last claim provides the backbone for Loesberg's critique of postmodernism, especially of Foucault and Bourdieu, which is, in my view, the most interesting turn of the book. Loesberg's level-headed and cogent critique manages to overcome the ideological trench war between postmodernists and their opponents and thereby opens up a way out of an impasse, which has hindered aesthetic discourse for decades. By exposing how postmodern anti-aesthetic tendencies fail to recognize the indispensable role that aesthetics play for their criticisms of foundationalist ideologies, he convincingly shows how they

have become accomplices of the Enlightenment foundationalism they oppose. In his view, the postmodern dismissal of aesthetics as 'merely' aesthetic only mirrors the foundationalists' insistence on the 'secondariness of art' (p. 13). At first sight, this seems to amount to a defeat of postmodernism: if postmodern thought is so deeply indebted to the very Enlightenment project it condemns, then its criticisms lose all force and credibility. However, Loesberg supports postmodern challenges to foundationalism and dismisses the all-too-common straw-man arguments, which are levelled against what he pejoratively calls 'the journalistic notion of that movement' (p. 9). This is exactly what motivates his 'return to aesthetics'. Loesberg wants to demonstrate the contingency of the tie between Enlightenment aesthetics and foundationalism, by which it was hijacked, and thus enable postmodernism to recognize the autonomy of aesthetics as its own non-foundational ground.

This is deconstruction and historical analysis at their finest. Loesberg uses his historical reconstructions to do to Foucault and Bourdieu what he says Derrida is doing to Kant: he 'does mean seriously to treat the work with indifference to its own ends in order to show those elements of its own functioning that it cannot recognise' (p. 231).

This is a wonderfully sober, yet passionate book by an aesthetician who is so unlike Agamben's 'man without content'. Loesberg cuts the Gordian knot that has prevented postmodernism from realizing its indebtedness to Enlightenment aesthetics and contemporary Enlightenment thinkers from appreciating the deeply enlightened motivations of postmodernism. And those who will not be convinced by his overall argument will still find thorough and compact interpretations of an impressive range of thinkers, who are all playing a part in contemporary debate.

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